

## Something Like Redemption by lapits (nadagio)

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**Summary:**

“You want me to... save puppies or somethin’. Some shit like that,” Billy said.

Steve laughed. He said, “Yeah, no. I mean, saving puppies is great but you don’t have to do good to stop being bad. There’s something in between, you know. Just. Normal.”

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Billy realizes he's an asshole. He's just not sure what to do about it.

## Something Like Redemption

### Author's Note:

\*dusts off an old one-shot that failed to become multi-chapter\* Here you go, fam!

Maybe Billy always knew, a little bit. Somewhere deep and hidden in his brain where he didn't dare look. Maybe the realization took time, evidence building slowly behind walls of deliberate ignorance. But he didn't really *understand*. Not until that moment.

In that moment Billy realized he was an asshole. A real mean son of a bitch. A piece of shit. Just like his father. Just like the man he despised and had sworn never to forgive in a million years.

Understanding didn't come when Billy was shouting, repeating the same miserable words that had so often hurt him. It didn't come when he broke things just to make others hurt. Not when he saw faces full of anger and fear and humiliation, not when he saw tears. It didn't come when his knuckles bled from slamming them over and over again into Harrington's face. Not when Max drugged him and threatened him to "leave me and my friends alone, Billy!"

Maybe he should have realized then. Probably should have.

But no, in all those moments all he felt was anger. Resentment. Hatred. He could twist his thoughts into knots justifying all that shit so that everyone else *deserved* it. It was a lesson. He was just showing them the consequences of pissing him off, showing them who was in charge. That was the way the world worked and they'd just have to learn or suffer as he did.

That's how he thought. That was his understanding of things until that moment.

The moment that came when all was calm, when Billy was in a relatively good mood. He was driving him and Max to school and his face was still bruised from the few good hits Harrington had gotten in, but today was a new day. The song on the radio was one of his

favorites and it felt good to tear down the road in his Camaro, careless of traffic laws and good sense.

It came after Billy asked – needing to know if he should wait for Max after school: “You hanging out with those freaks later?”

And Max turned to glare at him and said, as pissed off as he’d ever seen her, as she’d been when she nearly castrated him with a bat full of nails: “I said you’d better leave us *alone*, Billy!”

For a second Billy sat stunned. Confused. Didn’t see the connection between his question and her response.

Then it hit him.

*That* was the moment. Just an ordinary moment.

The moment he realized that Max saw *Billy* as the aggressor. As an irrational monster who only ever threatened. She heard a casual question and assumed it was asked maliciously. Because that’s all she’d ever seen. Because that’s all he’d ever been. An asshole. A real mean son of a bitch. A piece of shit.

Billy’s mouth dried out and he could feel something climbing up out of his stomach. Bile, maybe.

His first response to that understanding, naturally, was to feel angry. Same as ever.

“Just asking a fucking question, *Maxine*,” Billy said, sneering. Fingers gripped tight around the steering wheel. “Jesus. Walk home, then, I don’t give a shit.”

Max turned away with a huff, crossing her arms. The rest of the drive was silent.

*I don’t give a shit what she thinks* , Billy told himself. *I don’t. Fuck that bitch, anyway. I don’t **care**.*

He did care, as it turned out. Not so much about whether or not Max

walked home – she had functioning legs so she could *walk, dammit*. But about the fact that Billy was a piece of shit. Max would know, wouldn't she? They were family now, as much as he resented it. She would know.

He spent the next few days trying to *not care*. To act like he always did. But every time he shoved someone out of his way in the halls, every time he cussed someone out, laughed or made a snide comment – he didn't feel justified. He just felt like an asshole. A real mean son of a bitch. A piece of shit.

It made him *furious*. Above and beyond the anger he already felt every day, just living and surviving. And every time he tried to take it out on someone else, it just made him feel worse. It didn't help. Not one bit. Not anymore.

He tried something different. Tried *not* to be an asshole. But every time he opened his mouth he said something rude or demeaning. Every time he looked at someone he drew himself up tall, aggressive and sneering. He didn't know how to be anything but an asshole. That's all he was.

So he stopped. Everything. Talking. Looking. He went through the motions of going to school, surrounded himself with the same idiots he always did. They barely noticed. Kept up their usual stupid chatter and let him be with just a few questions that they didn't care how he answered.

That's when he finally managed to stop caring, too. About anything.

Billy didn't talk much, so he didn't talk back to his dad. And so his dad spent less time giving him shit. It seemed to confirm that this was the way things should be. Maybe how they should have been all along.

Max was happier now. Billy wasn't, but then he didn't feel much of anything. Not even anger.

He just didn't care.

Billy had gotten even better at basketball since he wasn't so focused on fucking with Harrington all the time. He just played the game. Coach seemed pleased. Everybody seemed pleased. They all liked him better this way, because before he was just an asshole. Now he was... nothing, maybe. A machine in human skin just doing what it's told. There was no reason to dislike a machine, as long as it did what it was told to do.

The term was ending soon and holidays approached. It just meant less time at school, more time in his room.

That day he lingered in the showers after practice, staring at the wall and losing track of time.

At some point he heard a cough and Harrington's voice saying, "You okay, Hargrove?"

Billy looked at the guy, whose face was still scabbed and yellow and was twisted in cautious concern, and eventually the question and its meaning registered in his brain.

"Yeah," Billy said, facing forward again.

"...You sure?" Harrington said after a minute. "It's just – your hair's been... a little flat, lately."

"My hair?" Billy repeated, and something like a feeling niggled at his brain. Something like confusion.

"Yeah," Harrington said. "Less volume, not as curly. Like maybe you haven't bothered styling it."

"And that's... a problem?"

"No... just. Makes me wonder if there's something bothering you."

Billy turned his head. Harrington made a convincing show of rinsing off and didn't return the look.

"Why do you care?" Billy said. The guy had every reason *not* to care.

Billy had been a bigger asshole to him than most.

Harrington shrugged, wiping off his face under the spray of water. He said, "Thought maybe you'd want to talk about it. I can listen."

Billy's skin crawled, the anger creeping in. He sneered and snapped, "Don't act like we're friends, *King Steve*. You forget how I beat your face in not too long ago?"

"...So you don't want to talk about it, is what you're saying?"

It wasn't the reaction Billy expected. He didn't know what he expected. The anger fled as quickly as it came. He felt nothing again.

Billy turned off his showerhead and dried off, got dressed and left the locker room without another word. Harrington let him go.

Despite every intention to forget about their brief exchange of words in the showers, Billy kept thinking about it. Kept wondering why Harrington even cared to ask. Billy was an asshole. A mean son of a bitch. A piece of shit. So why would *King Steve* want to *listen* to him talk about his problems?

It didn't make sense. It bothered him. Was Harrington just... *that nice*? Some kind of do-gooder white knight type who couldn't just let someone be miserable without offering a helping hand? It sounded like bullshit. It pissed him off, and for once Billy just seethed instead of lashing out at everyone around him.

What he *did* do was: the next day, he stalked up to Harrington where he was waiting by his car for one of those other brats to get out of their little after school club. He got in close, all bristling anger like he used to be, and he -

He didn't know what to say. He waited for words to come, but they didn't. Billy deflated. Harrington watched him quietly, wary but calm.

"Why aren't you king anymore?" is what Billy finally said. It's what Billy had wanted to know since first being introduced to the *idea* of

Steve Harrington. He needed to know how a man could give up all the power, lose *everything*, and not only *not care* but even be sort of *happy*.

Maybe it was because Billy wasn't sneering, wasn't poking fun or looking for a weakness he could exploit, but Harrington finally told him.

He said, "I had something of a wake up call, I guess. About what really matters. You may have heard Nancy's friend died last year. Last place she was seen was at my place. Some other stuff on top of that and... it just didn't seem to matter, anymore. Any of it."

"But *something* matters," Billy pressed. "You care about *something*."

"Yeah..." Harrington smiled, small and soft. "I care about my friends, my family. *They* matter."

Billy stared at him. Tried to think of anyone in his life who mattered. Who he cared about. Who cared about *him*. His mom, maybe, but -

Billy turned and walked away. Sat in his car and lit a cigarette, feeling miserable and sick. No one. There was no one. No one and nothing.

When Max arrived Billy started up the car without a word, as had become habit. Max *could* have been someone, maybe. *Family*. Someone who mattered. But Billy was an asshole and Max hated him, for good reason. So. That was that.

Billy went through the last few days of class feeling miserable, wishing he could go back to just *not caring*. Then he spent days lounging around the house feeling miserable, until his dad yelled at him to "get off your lazy ass, you piece of shit."

He started leaving the house and just walking with no destination. It was cold as fuck because he still didn't have a proper winter coat but what was a little misery on top of more misery? He got to know the streets of Hawkins, Indiana pretty well. All the neighborhoods and storefronts lit up with Christmas decorations.

It was kind of nice. Maybe. Calming, at least. A little less miserable.

Billy passed a store one day and his eyes caught on a skateboard displayed in the window. He lingered. He stared.

He thought about Max's board breaking beneath his foot. For some bullshit reason – for lying – when really Billy was pissed off because he couldn't control her. Because she was a fucking human being and not a slave. Because he was an asshole.

He kept walking. But the next day he came back and went inside.

When Max opened her present on Christmas morning, she double checked the tag on the wrapping. It did in fact read "From: Billy." She stared at him and Billy tried to offer a smile but it was probably more of a grimace. She looked down at the skateboard and spun its wheels with a frown as Susan said, "What a nice gift! Don't forget to say 'thank you,' Max."

"Thank you," Max mumbled obediently.

Later she followed Billy to his room, carrying the board, and demanded, "Is this a *bribe*?"

"No," Billy said, putting away a new shirt from Susan and some basketball sneakers from his dad. "It's a skateboard."

"*Why*?" Max said, and Billy shrugged.

"Needed a new one, didn't you?" he said. She didn't really – the old one still worked well enough. It was just ugly with the duct tape. Because Billy broke it. Because he was an asshole.

Max knew that. Probably knew some of what he was thinking, too. Probably thought this was meant to be some sort of apology. Maybe it was.

"Whatever," Max said. She left him alone in his room.



Billy went to Ana's New Year's party sporting a shiny new bruise on his leg after being shoved into side table for forgetting to "take out the trash, you shit!" Billy went to Ana's New Year's party because he was miserable. Because he wanted to get drunk. He managed to do that, at least, but it only left him feeling miserable and *honest* about it. Not a great combination.

After telling the third person who wanted him to do a keg stand to "fuck off," Billy started to maybe understand why Harrington didn't give a shit about being king. It didn't seem worth the effort anymore.

He took another shot of the tequila Tommy was passing around.

That's when Billy saw him. Harrington. Standing next to his ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend and *smiling* at them. How could a person be *that fucking nice*? Billy wanted to be angry. He sort of was. But more than that he wanted to mess with the guy, to be an asshole by *not* being an asshole. Convolutioned maybe, but Harrington had offered to listen as if he wanted to be *friends* or something. So that's what Billy would be – a friend.

It made sense at the time, in Billy's alcohol-warped thoughts.

"Steeeeeve!" Billy said, approaching them and throwing an arm around Harrington's shoulders for a side-hug. All three of them looked at Billy like he'd done something threatening. It was funny as hell. "How you been, amigo? Nice Christmas?"

"Yes?" Harrington said cautiously, sharing a confused look with Wheeler and Byers. "Uh... and you?"

"Great!" Billy lied, grinning wide and sloppy and over-enthusiastic. He kept his arm around Harrington's shoulders and leaned on him a bit, looking at the other two. "Don't think we've met. Nancy and Jonathan, right?"

"Yes. And you're Billy Hargrove," Wheeler said, meeting his eyes with a fair bit of distaste obvious in her expression. Byers just looked at his feet.

“Tha’s me,” Billy said, and his grin didn’t falter. “You guys enjoying the party?”

“We were,” Wheeler said. The implication of *not anymore now that you’re here* was not hard for Billy to understand, even when drunk.

“So!” Harrington said quickly. “What brings you over here, uh, Billy?”

“Nothin’ at all,” Billy said. “Jus’ sayin hello to my buddy. Aren’t we buddies, Steve?”

“Uh, sure... Buddies.” Harrington waited for Billy to say something else, maybe to explain what he was *actually* doing, but Billy’s plan didn’t extend beyond coming over and acting like a friend. So he said nothing and continued to grin, eyes glazed.

“Uh.” When Billy just stood there, Harrington eventually turned to Wheeler and said, “Right. You were talking about... a book?”

Haltingly, their conversation picked up again but Billy didn’t participate. Didn’t really listen, just stared into the distance as the alcohol started to hit his system *hard*. He felt less miserable than he had in a while – Harrington warm at his side, friendly words being spoken around him. It was nice.

When he started leaning too much into Harrington’s shoulder, the guy staggered a bit and excused himself from his *actual* friends in order to guide Billy to a nearby couch. He dropped Billy onto the cushions and then kneeled in front of him to meet his eyes.

“Billy?” Harrington said. His hair looked so soft. Was it soft? “Are you okay?”

“No,” Billy said. “‘m an asshole.”

Harrington laughed. “Yeah,” he said. “Is that all?”

Billy shook his head. His face twisted in agony. “Piece a’ shit. I’m a piece a’ shit. Awful.”

Harrington stopped laughing. He said, “Uh, wouldn’t usually

disagree, but. You haven't been so bad, lately."

Billy kept shaking his head.

"Billy?"

"Not me, tha's... a *machine*," Billy said. He could feel his eyes well up with tears but didn't care enough in that moment to feel embarrassed about it. "I'm a piece a' shit."

"Wow. How about we go somewhere... quieter, okay? And I'll get you some water."

Harrington got him to his feet and helped drag him up the stairs, turning away anyone who approached out of curiosity or concern. He kicked a couple out of the guest bathroom and led Billy to sit on the closed toilet.

"I'll be right back. Okay?" Harrington said.

Billy didn't respond and after a moment of hovering Harrington left. Billy sat and didn't really think about anything. Just *felt*. Felt sad and alone. Not angry.

Sometime later Harrington came back with a glass of water and helped Billy drink it without spilling too much down his front. Then he sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched Billy.

"You want to talk about it?" he asked.

Billy shook his head.

"Okay, uh..." Harrington sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "How about I talk? That cool?"

Billy shrugged.

"Okay." It took a minute before Harrington really started talking. "I know... a few things about being an asshole. I *was* an asshole. For a long time. And it... took me a while to realize I didn't want to be. That I didn't *have* to be. Does that make sense?"

Billy didn't say anything, but he was listening. Listening carefully even though he couldn't really understand the importance of those words. Not then, when he was drunk.

"So. What I'm saying is, you don't *have* to keep being an asshole. You can change, if that's what you want. But it takes some work."

That niggled at him, a bit. Billy wondered just what sort of *work* Harrington was suggesting.

"You want me to... save *puppies* or somethin'. Some shit like that," Billy said.

Steve laughed. He said, "Yeah, no. I mean, saving puppies is great but you don't have to do *good* to stop being bad. There's something in between, you know. Just. Normal."

"You jus'..." Billy said, squinting at him. "Want me to apolo- say *sorry*. For your face."

"Sure, if you want to," Harrington said. "But, I'd rather just know you won't do it again. To me, or anybody else."

"Hmm," Billy said. He fiddled with the ring on his hand. "Sorry. About your face. It's pretty..." Maybe there was something more to that sentence, but that was all he said.

"...That's a start."

"Sorry," Billy repeated. Mumbled.

"Look, uh, I don't know how much of this you'll remember tomorrow, but. That offer is still on the table, to listen I mean. Whenever you want, as long as there's no punching involved." Harrington sighed. "Shit, look at me playing agony aunt. But seriously, man. I've been there."

Harrington waved his hand in front of his face with a frown.

"I mean, maybe not so much *there* there. I've never threatened kids or beat anyone unconscious. But I was an asshole. Still am a bit maybe. So we've got things in common, is what I'm saying."

Billy kept fiddling with his ring. Around and around on his finger.

“So are we good?” Harrington said. “Are you good? Do you... need anything, right now? ‘Cause, not gonna lie, I don’t really want to spend the rest of the party in this bathroom.”

“‘m good,” Billy said.

“Good.” Harrington stood and offered him a hand. Billy took it and Harrington tugged him to his feet.

That’s when every occupant of the house *outside* that bathroom began to count down.

“Ten! ...Nine! ....Eight! ...Seven!”

Harrington dropped Billy’s hand and put his fists on his hips. He said, “Damn. Start of a new year and here we are -”

At “one” he was cut off by cheering. And by Billy lurching forward to press his lips against Harrington’s for a “kiss.”

Their mouths barely made dry, slightly off-target contact before Harrington grabbed Billy by the upper arms and pushed, pulling back with wide, shocked eyes.

“s tradition,” Billy said, a bit defensively. The alcohol was starting to wear off *just* enough that he felt horrified by his own actions, but not enough to prevent him from actually *doing* stupid shit like *kissing Steve fucking Harrington oh my god*.

“Wow. You are *really* wasted,” Harrington said, and then he laughed.

Billy laughed too so that he wouldn’t cry.

“But you seem to be in a better mood, so how about we get back to the party, yeah?” Harrington smiled, so friendly and so fucking forgiving.

“Yeah.” Billy went to the door and fumbled to unlock it before leaving the bathroom with all possible speed.

“You’re welcome!” Harrington shouted after him.

Billy swallowed a scream and pushed through the crowd to get outside. He needed air. He needed to sober up and avoid Harrington for the rest of eternity, probably.

The next day Billy woke up slightly hungover and extremely mortified. He, unfortunately, remembered everything. Leaning against Harrington like a crutch, *crying*, listening to a snooty lecture about *becoming a better person*, and fucking... *kissing* Harrington like a fucking idiot. Jesus Christ he was lucky the idiot just laughed it off. Was too *nice* to tell anyone about it, too. Hopefully. Shit.

To avoid thinking about the disaster of a failed kiss, Billy thought about what Harrington actually *said* instead. About it taking some work to be *not* an asshole. Not a saint, either, but... not an asshole. Not a mean son of a bitch. Or a piece of shit. And still be *Billy*. Not some... machine, dead inside, going through the motions of living without actually *living*.

That was... reasonable, wasn’t it? Something Billy could manage? He had tried briefly, sort of, not to be an asshole. But he hadn’t thought about what he *would* be, instead. He wasn’t sure what he *wanted* to be, if not an asshole.

It was the first day of a new year, and Billy didn’t want to do some stupid shit like *make a resolution*, but... Maybe he had some things to think about. Some things to change.

Billy went for a walk.

First thing he decided was that he needed a fucking winter coat.

### **Author's Note:**

IMO redemption doesn't always have to mean grand/self-sacrificing gestures or rehashing the past and working for the forgiveness of everyone you've ever wronged. Sometimes it's just... becoming a better person. And that's not so easy.

Anyway, I may write a more Harringrove-ish sequel from Steve's POV at some point. But for now this is just a one-shot. Hope you enjoyed!